

BENJAMIN BRECKINRIDGE WARFIELD,  
D.D., LL.D., Litt.D.

BENJAMIN BRECKINRIDGE WARFIELD was born at "Grasmere" near Lexington, Kentucky, almost one hundred years ago—on 5th November, 1851.<sup>1</sup> There flowed in his veins the blood of the staunch English Puritans who withstood the oppression of the Stuart kings and the blood of the Ulster-Scotch who first settled in the Cumberland Valley of Pennsylvania and in the up-country of Virginia. His father, William Warfield, a breeder of horses and cattle, could trace his line of descent back to a Richard Warfield who settled in Maryland in the sixteenth century. His mother was Mary Cabell Breckinridge, daughter of a distinguished Presbyterian minister, Professor Robert J. Breckinridge.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin was reared in a household where the *Shorter Catechism* was normally completed in the sixth year, followed by the memorising of the Scripture proofs and of the *Larger Catechism*, and of Scripture portions. He attended private schools in Lexington and graduated from the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) with the highest honours in 1871, when only nineteen years of age. In February 1872 he set out for a period of travel and study in Europe. He spent some time at Edinburgh and Heidelberg. Writing from the latter place in the mid-summer of 1872 he announced his intention of studying for the ministry of the Gospel. He had made a public profession of faith when only sixteen, but had hitherto expressed no serious purpose of studying theology. He had been reared in an atmosphere of vital piety, and his mother had often expressed her hope that her sons would become preachers of the Gospel. Benjamin had, however, inherited from his father a reticence with regard

<sup>1</sup> Biographical material relating to Dr. Warfield is very scanty. For this sketch of his life reference has been made to very brief notices in the following: *The Dictionary of American Biography*; *Who Was Who in America*; *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. xix. (1921), No. 2; *Revelation and Inspiration* (Biographical Sketch by Ethelbert D. Warfield).

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Breckinridge and his brother John were eminent men. Robert was president of Jefferson College, founder and president of the Theological Seminary at Danville, Kentucky, and Moderator of the General Assembly. He was an ardent advocate of the emancipation of slaves and was temporary chairman of the Republican Convention which in 1864 renominated Abraham Lincoln. He was the author of a system of theology and acted as editor of two journals. John Breckinridge was a professor of theology at Princeton Seminary for a number of years; he was son-in-law of Dr. Samuel Miller, one of the first two professors in the Seminary. The father of the Breckinridge brothers was the Hon. John Breckinridge, Attorney-General of the United States under Jefferson's administration. The two brothers were leaders of the Old School party in the conflict which led to the division of the Presbyterian Church in 1838.

to personal matters. So his decision, announced from Heidelberg, came as a surprise even to his most intimate friends. On his return home he became for a time an editor of the *Farmer's Home Journal* of Lexington. The great divine who was to be so widely known as an editor of conservative theological journals began his editorial work in another sphere, giving his attention particularly to matters of livestock. It is worth noting, too, that his early bent was for mathematics and physics, in which he obtained perfect marks, and that at one point in his early training he made strenuous objection to the study of Greek, in which he was later to show such proficiency as a teacher. At twenty-one he "realised the paramount claims of God and religion upon him"<sup>1</sup> and therefore in September 1873 entered Princeton Seminary to prepare himself for the ministry of the Word. He graduated in 1876. Among his teachers in the Seminary were Charles Hodge, then in his seventies, and Charles's son, Caspar Wistar Hodge. After graduation he was for a time stated supply of the First Presbyterian Church of Dayton, Ohio. He received a call to the pastorate of this church in the summer of 1876, but declined it, as he had determined to go abroad for further study. On 3rd August 1876 he was married in Lexington to Annie Pearce Kinkead and soon after sailed for Europe. He studied in Germany at the University of Leipzig (1876-7). Returning home, he served as assistant pastor in the First Presbyterian Church of Baltimore for about a year and was ordained by the Presbytery of Ebenezer on 26th April 1879. In 1878 he was appointed Instructor, and in the following year was installed as Professor, of New Testament Exegesis and Literature in Western Theological Seminary, Allegheny, Pennsylvania. In 1887 he was called to his *alma mater*, Princeton Theological Seminary, to succeed Dr. A. A. Hodge as Charles Hodge Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology. In delivering the Memorial Address after Dr. Warfield's death, Dr. Francis L. Patton recalled "the delight with which Dr. C. W. Hodge welcomed his former pupil to the chair which his father and his brother had successively filled".<sup>2</sup> Many of Warfield's friends questioned the wisdom of the transfer from the department of Exegesis to that of Theology, but "recalling that Dr. Charles Hodge had been first a New Testament student and always a prince of exegetes, he deter-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from article on B. B. Warfield in *The Expositor* (vol. xxiv, p. 26) by Dr. J. R. Mackay. This article is largely a Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. xix (1921), no. 3, p. 370.

mined to accept the call".<sup>1</sup> In this historic chair at Princeton he continued teaching till the day of his death in 1921. He was taken suddenly ill on Christmas Eve, 1920. His condition was serious for a time, but his health seemed to improve, and on 16th February 1921 he felt able to resume his teaching in part and met one of his classes in the afternoon. Apparently there were no immediate ill effects from the exertion, but he died at ten o'clock that evening from an acute attack of angina pectoris. A few sharp pangs and he was at rest for ever.

Within the space of nine months the people of the Reformed Faith were bereft of their three greatest leaders. On 12th November 1920 Abraham Kuyper was taken; on 16th February 1921 Benjamin Warfield; and on 29th July 1921 Dr. Herman Bavinck. These three were devoted friends. Their parting was for a very brief time; their reunion in glory was speedy.

Dr. Warfield was a prolific writer. He followed in that respect in the steps of his revered master, John Calvin. From 1880, when his first articles appeared in *The Presbyterian Review*, to the time of his death, when three series of articles on Perfectionism had just begun to appear in three different theological quarterlies, his pen seemed ever busy. In 1889 he succeeded Dr. Francis L. Patton on the editorial board of *The Presbyterian Review*. A year later he became editor-in-chief of its successor, *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, and continued in this office till the end of 1902, when this Review was in turn succeeded by *The Princeton Theological Review*, to which he was one of the chief contributors. He was the author of some twenty books, besides pamphlets and addresses. He wrote numerous articles for encyclopaedias, journals and newspapers. As provided in his will, his most important articles in journals and encyclopaedias were collected and published. The committee to which he entrusted this task was composed of his brother, Dr. Ethelbert D. Warfield, and his colleagues on the faculty of Princeton Seminary, Professors W. P. Armstrong and C. W. Hodge, Junior. These articles thus collected and published form ten large volumes. It is almost thirty years since his death, and it is no small tribute to him that fresh editions of some of his works are still being issued.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Revelation and Inspiration*, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> The first of the ten volumes issued as provided in his will was *Revelation and Inspiration*. This has recently been reissued by the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, under the title *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (reviewed

All his writings bear the marks of exact scholarship and wide learning. His special fields of study were New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, Patristics, and Theology. He had the sure touch in all these departments. In the field of the history of doctrine he displayed a fine historical sense.<sup>1</sup> There was no need in his case, as in Augustine's, to issue a volume of *Retractions*.

We have only to glance over his book reviews in *The Princeton Theological Review* to see something of his wide reading as well as of his marvellous gifts of analysis and discrimination. Error is brought to the touchstone of truth and is dealt with fairly but faithfully. No wonder many lovers of the Reformed Faith over the Christian world looked for each issue of the *Princeton Review* and read with interest and profit what he had to say on the latest work from the pen of some outstanding scholar of the liberal school. Dr. F. L. Patton, referring to him as a speaker, said that "his words proceeded out of his mouth as if they walked on velvet".<sup>2</sup> As a writer his style was certainly marked by no great flourishes; it was the servant of his thought; but one virtue it did have—however profound the theme, the meaning was clear.

In the Memorial Address already referred to, Dr. F. L. Patton declares: "If we wish to put a proper estimate upon Dr. Warfield's work, we must fully understand his theological position, and the key to that position is his unfaltering belief in the inspiration of the Old and New Testaments. . . . His fearless belief was a buttress to men as he stood foursquare to every wind that blows in his unshaken confidence in the oracles of God."<sup>3</sup> He vindicates this belief as to the Scriptures in the articles which have been collected and published in the volume *Revelation and Inspiration* (now republished under the title *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*). This book is a veritable arsenal of argument to overwhelm the objector and to prove that the historic doctrine of inspiration held by the Christian Church is the doctrine taught in the Scriptures themselves, and in particular by our Lord and His apostles.

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in our January number, pp. 67ff). The same publishers promise another volume with important selections from his writings.

<sup>1</sup> This may be seen in his volumes on *Tertullian and Augustine*, *Calvin and Calvinism*, and *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*. Dr. J. Gresham Machen spoke of Warfield as "one of the greatest masters in the field of the history of doctrine" (*The Christian View of Man*, p. 273).

<sup>2</sup> *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. xix, no. 3, p. 370.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

In this book there is an article on "God-Inspired Scripture". He admits with characteristic candour that at first he too hastily adopted Dr. Cremer's view (expressed in the article on "Inspiration" in the second edition of Herzog's *Realencyklopaedie*) on the meaning of *theopneustos* in 2 Tim. iii. 16, making that word define Scripture, not as to its origin, but as to its effect—not as "inspired of God", but as "inspiring its readers".<sup>1</sup> Dr. Warfield goes into the matter in his article with his usual thoroughness and proves, with a wealth of reference to classical, post-classical and patristic literature, that the word *theopneustos* is expressive of the origination of Scripture and not of its effects. Professor James Moffatt in his Hibbert Lectures in 1921 admitted that Warfield proved his case on this point.<sup>2</sup>

A fine piece of work is his examination of *Perfectionism* (two volumes) in its origin and growth in Europe and America. One of those with whom he crossed swords on this matter—a speaker and teacher well-known on both sides of the Atlantic—spoke of Warfield as living too much in the white light of reason. It was scarcely a fair comment. Warfield bowed with his whole soul to the Word of his God. His whole spirit panted to be "in all its movement"—as he said of Calvin—"subjected to God's government". The charge brought by his opponent seems to be a confession that Warfield had the best of the argument.

Another fine piece of work is his *Counterfeit Miracles*, published in 1918. This deals with extra-Biblical religious thaumaturgy from early Christian times down to recent days. The faith-cures of the Church of Rome and of modern movements are examined. The facts are marshalled and thoroughly sifted, and the whole examination is well-documented. Dr. Louis M. Sweet in the *Biblical Review* tells of his unbounded delight in the reading of this book which he describes as "a thorough-going review of extra-Biblical, religious thaumaturgy". Dr. Sweet says: "This whole subject needed exploration by a competent student, with adequate historical apparatus and with sufficiently critical mind to sift the evidence and to undertake the careful and judicious discrimination which is the first condition of dealing with problems so varied and complex. Dr. Warfield has done his work thoroughly and well. Every minister, teacher and intelligent Christian layman with a sense of contemporary needs and

<sup>1</sup> *Revelation and Inspiration*, pp. 231 ff.; *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, pp. 245 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *The Approach to the New Testament*, by James Moffatt (footnote on p. 72).

dangers should not only read the discussion, but become acquainted with the literature to which reference is made."

He delivered five lectures at the Princeton Summer School of Theology in June 1914 and these were issued in book form in the following year under the title *The Plan of Salvation*. The theme lay near to his heart. He delights to emphasise that "it is God alone who saves, and that in every element of the saving process". Not all his fellow-Calvinists will agree with him when he says that "when Christ comes again, it will be to a fully saved world". His view might "possibly" be put in this way—"the Scriptures teach an eschatological universalism, not an each-and-every universalism".<sup>1</sup> He held the view of Charles Hodge who "wrote in pencil with trembling lines on one of his 'Conference Papers', not long before his end, that he believed that the vast majority of the human race were to share the beatitudes and glories of his Lord's redemption".<sup>2</sup>

His literary labours were not only many but varied. One of his earliest works was on textual criticism (first published in 1886 and often reprinted).<sup>3</sup> He wrote a volume of hymns and religious verses. Three fine volumes of sermons are specially worthy of mention—*The Power of God unto Salvation* (1903), *The Saviour of the World* (1914), and *Faith and Life* (1916). These sermons warm the cockles of the hearts of lovers of the Reformed Faith.

It has been said of him that he was "a dogmatic rather than a systematic theologian, and was less interested in the system of doctrine than in the doctrines of the system".<sup>4</sup> Certainly, though he wrote much, he did not attempt to write a Systematic Theology. Perhaps this was because of his reverence and esteem for the work of his master, Charles Hodge, which he used as a text-book in his classroom. Possibly he differed from Hodge on points. Prince of exegetes though Charles Hodge was esteemed to be, the younger man was the abler exegete of the two. But he felt that Hodge's *Systematic Theology* rightly held the field and needed no replacing. His attitude might be summed up in the words:

<sup>1</sup> *The Plan of Salvation*, second edition, pp. 127-33.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Charles Hodge*, by his son, A. A. Hodge, p. 532.

<sup>3</sup> *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, a volume of 225 pages in Robertson Nicoll's "Theological Educator" series. That Warfield and his fellow-Princetonians should have aligned themselves so wholeheartedly on the side of Hort in the field of textual criticism indicates that they were not *temperamentally* conservative or traditionalist, as a man like Burgon obviously was. If they were conservative in the field of *higher* criticism, it was because of their theological conviction that the Reformed faith involved conservatism in this field as it did not in the other.—ED.]

<sup>4</sup> Memorial Address by Dr. F. L. Patton in *Princeton Theological Review*, vol. xix, no. 3, p. 386.

“Give me the master.” If he wrote no such work, at any rate when someone in the same succession sets himself to build the temple of theology, stones and pillars from the Warfield quarry will be found most useful in the structure. One has only to glance at the works of Professor J. Gresham Machen or Dr. Loraine Boettner to see how often Warfield’s work is put to use.

Warfield was no doubt best known as a leader and defender of the cause of orthodoxy. Professor R. H. Nichols of Auburn Seminary says of him in the article in the *Dictionary of American Biography*: “He was deeply persuaded of the truth of the doctrine of original sin. At Princeton he continued without concessions the theological traditions established by the Hodges.” A convinced and enthusiastic Calvinist, he was profoundly convinced that in the Westminster Standards “we possess the most complete, the most fully elaborated and carefully guarded, the most perfect, and the most vital expression that has ever been framed by the hand of man, of all that enters into evangelical religion, and of all that must be safeguarded if evangelical religion is to persist in the world”.<sup>1</sup> He did not like the amendments and additions to the Confession made by the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. in 1903. He held that these changes marred the work of the Westminster divines. He opposed their introduction in articles and pamphlets, but he wielded his pen in vain.

He was not much heard in the courts of the Church to which he belonged; he was not outstanding in debate; he did not excel as a pulpit orator or platform speaker. His *forte* was in the classroom or with the pen of a ready writer. He was often called upon to engage in controversy for the faith and he was certainly not the man to shirk the fray. Not his to seek peace at the expense of truth! The following story was told of him. A prominent lady of Princeton met him during the sessions of a General Assembly and said: “Dr. Warfield, I hear there is going to be trouble at the Assembly. Do let us pray for peace.” “I am praying,” replied Dr. Warfield, “that if they do not do what is right, there may be a mighty battle.”

He was a doughty warrior, but he was also the perfect knight. The editor of *The British Weekly* described him as “a man of great personal charm”. Dr. Francis L. Patton in his Memorial Address tells us that in the prime of his manhood he was a most

<sup>1</sup> *The Significance of the Westminster Standards* (New York, 1898), p. 2; see also pp. 26, 34, 36.

imposing figure: " Tall, erect, with finely moulded features and singular grace and courtesy of demeanour, he bore the marks of a gentleman to his finger-tips." " There was," adds Dr. Patton, " something remarkable in his voice. It had the liquid softness of the south rather than the metallic resonance which we look for in those who breathe the crisp air of a northern climate."

He was the most able and learned defender of orthodox Calvinism in the English-speaking world in his generation. His scholarship and worth were recognised, and honours came to him from far and near. Among other tributes he received the degree of D.D. from his *alma mater*, Princeton College, in 1880, the LL.D. from the same institution in 1892, and the degree of S.T.D. from the University of Utrecht, Holland, in 1913. He was appointed Lecturer on the Smyth Foundation at Columbia Theological Seminary, South Carolina, 1917-18.

His predecessors in the Chair of Theology at Princeton were great men of God—Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge and A. A. Hodge. He was thought worthy to follow in that goodly succession and he did not fail in the trust reposed in him.

Dr. R. H. Nichols in the *Dictionary of American Biography* refers to him as " a vivacious teacher, expert in hand-to-hand argument ", and adds, " he moulded many students for a generation ". Yes, and he continues to play a part in moulding many students of theology still. " He, being dead, yet speaketh."

W. J. GRIER.

*Belfast.*